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ABSTRACT

Evaluative criteria implicit in written comments on student writing can embody a definition of text which leads students to see text as superficial and formal instead of deep and meaningful. Students develop their perceptions of professors' values from the cues they receive via comments. A major problem, especially among faculty from different disciplines who find themselves teaching writing, is an emphasis on surface changes over meaning changes. This assumption was tested by asking 17 faculty from 14 disciplines to mark a paper considered to be at a low level of performance. Responses included grades from F to B but mostly in the D range, and comments falling into three categories: rules of grammar and usage, problems with organization and style, and content. There was no indication to the student that changes in the macrostructure were most needed. Most of the comments offered advice on editing, implying that all that was needed was to correct mistakes and delete repetition. The comments lead to a definition of writing as product which must be manipulated through correction, deletion, etc.--a definition that is a perversion of a new critical stance toward criticism. Opposing such a stance are professors who interact with students through comments which lead to revision, a stance rooted in reader response criticism. Instructors must become more aware of the signals they are sending to students, especially the weaker students. (HB)

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Is There A Text in this Grade?

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Is There a Text in this Grade?

The Implicit Messages of Comments on Student Writing

Since the process movement, our role as graders is supposed to have shifted from "judging" to "coaching" (Dobler and Amoriell 214-23). Still, one of the most important roles our comments play is to justify a grade or to point to revision strategies (Lees 37-74). Consequently, our evaluation affects students' construction of the meaning of text. Evaluative criteria implicit in our comments can embody a definition of text which will lead students to see text as superficial and formal instead of deep and meaningful. While knowledge of holistic scales and evaluative criteria may help us to avoid subjectivity in grades we actually assign (Zellermayer 145-65), the comments that we use to accompany a grade can certainly mix the signals about the importance we place on the construction of meaning and how we perceive rhetorical constructs (see also Gere, Schuessler, and Abbott 348-61).

Not long ago, for example, Mimi Schwartz studied rhetorical preferences by asking students and professors to respond to three passages of text. Professors were asked what they preferred; students were asked to choose both their preferences and what they perceived a professor's preference to be. Schwartz wrote, "Whereas our rhetorical values as readers shift with the writing context--depending on perceptions of audience, purpose, style, and content--our students' rhetorical values as writers seem to stay the same: Use big words to be impressive; write

more to be intelligent; be impersonal to be logical; use correct punctuation to be mature" (61). Students develop their perceptions of their professors' values from the cues they send: comments, grades, oral feedback both in and outside class. Unfortunately, we are said to be even less likely to provide interactive comments to students who need them the most (Cohen). Since comments to weaker students pertain largely to mechanics and grammar, these students do not receive the proper cues to lead them to see that creating a text is matter of making meaning. Weaker students may get the message that their problem is not what they are saying but how they are packaging the material--what one of my students calls the icing on the cake--when in reality weaker writing is usually flawed by deeper problems.

Faculty from different disciplines who are new to the teaching of writing especially may find that they instruct students in learning just the values Schwartz's students professed to have, and more. One problem I see in evaluation of student writing--especially by people who have been trained primarily in disciplines other than composition but not only those--is an emphasis on surface changes in style or mechanics over meaning changes either in microstructure or macrostructure or content even in papers which are essentially not ready for that type of response but need to be rewritten. Surface changes involve copy editing, additions, deletions, and so on to change the form of the text or additions to, deletions of, consolidations of, and so on to modify the text but not change the meaning. Meaning changes involve those to the microstructure (where all ideas are represented) or macrostructure (that which needs to be there but isn't) (Faigley and Witte 95-108).

Grade 3

Recently, to help with planning for writing-across-the-curriculum seminars that I conduct at my college, I tested this assumption by giving my colleagues a paper that fits Paul B. Diederich's criteria for a paper to be evaluated "low" (53-58). Seventeen members of the faculty from 14 disciplines responded to a request that they evaluate a student paper. The student's assignment had been to develop a narrow topic from the broad topic of homelessness in order to write an informative paper that would use secondary sources and documentation as needed. The paper's topic--three types of homelessness--remained too broad, and thus the exposition remained unfocused and correspondingly repetitive. The author exhibited no engagement with the topic. There were also a number of errors in fact, grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation. No sources were cited, which suggested that the student had not followed the assignment closely and done a little research. The paper was indeed "low."

Let me further illustrate some of the weaknesses.

The thesis of the paper was the fragment "Three groups of people forced to become part of the increasing homeless population."

Topic sentences were as follows:

> Homelessness is no longer a problem exclusive to the large metropolises.

> Of the homeless population, the number of homeless children is extremely shocking and is growing as fast as the number of the homeless.

> The increasing number of the homeless is due, in part, to the scarcity of jobs.
>
> Another group [mentally ill people] makes up a large group of the homeless.

The concluding point was, "The increasing amounts of homeless people is a major problem and should be dealt with."

Just this information is enough to let us know how broad the topic remained, how little substance the ideas seemed to have, and how little coherence the final paper achieved. Although this paper was turned in as a final draft, it had not gone through workshops. Appearing mysteriously on my desk one morning, it had been prepared by a student who was later asked to withdraw from the course because of lack of attendance and participation. The paper, to me, seemed to be a variation of the five-paragraph theme, with an extra paragraph on the mentally ill thrown in for effect (or length). It seemed to have been written in very little time by someone who had no grasp of the subject and so repeated vague and general facts over and over, to no purpose. Numerous assertions such as "Today the number of homeless is growing by large percentages annually" seemed full of the proverbial hot air.

My instructions to my colleagues were, "Respond to the following essay by grading, marking, correcting, responding--whatever process you usually use in grading." One person declined to comment or grade because he did not know the time frame (first or last assignment) or any of the

other multiple variables aside from purpose and assignment that he felt should be used in "grading." Six people treated the paper as a first draft and commented without grading. Ten assigned grades; and of these ten, three assigned two different grades: separate grades for a journalism major/other major, mid-semester/end-of-the-semester work, and content/writing. Most assigned within the D range. There was one F and one B, "almost an A." The F was the grade a journalism professor would have given to a student majoring in journalism. This same professor's D would have been given to another student "just for putting words down on paper." The one person who assigned different grades for content and writing gave the content a C and the writing a D.

Comments, in the following order of frequency, pertained to three categories of response: rules on grammar and usage, problems with organization and style, and content. Except in a few instances, professors seemed to offer advice that would lead a student to rework what was actually on the page for a revision and better grade. For example, one professor noted that the student needed to reorganize the information because it was choppy. Others suggested errors needed to be corrected. But there was no shared sense that the student needed to start over from scratch and learn something specific about homelessness before putting pen to paper. There was, to be technical, no indication to the student that the microstructure was weak and that changes in the macrostructure were probably most needed.

Although there was consensus on the fact that this was a weak paper, the only relatively common assertion about why it was weak was the repetitiveness of content. However, the comments were usually made in

such a way as to indicate that the problem was basically an editorial one. A professor whose final comment was "D in present form but the clever opening suggests potential . . ." labeled several errors, noted a need to sentence-combine in the first paragraph, and wrote "repetitious" four times in the margins. No comment was made to lead the student to revise other than in superficial ways or to think the paper's problem was as severe as the grade would warrant. (If the student actually did end up deleting repetitive content as many suggested, the paper would be left full of holes.) Those who noted repetitiveness did not necessarily direct the student to go to the library and do some research or to develop ideas conveyed.

Fewer than half responded much to meaning otherwise, and less than half of these focused on meaning in their comments whereas the majority stressed errors in form and gave the occasional reference to content. One who assigned a grade, for example, noted that there was a "repetition of ideas rather than an expansion of the main idea." The most direct criticism came from a professor who commented "There is nothing new here" along with comments such as "exag.?" (for exaggeration) and "facts not facts." This professor, who treated the paper as if it were to be revised, said in a final comment, "You tend to exaggerate to get people's attention. There are no sources for controversial statements, much less believable ones." Two others noted the need to introduce facts, although they saw this type of revision as meaning-preserving and most of their other comments pertained to formal features. One suggested different permutations of the content. Another suggested the insertion of facts into sentences as they stood.

A few members of the faculty complimented the student on the content, even on the opening, which was logically inconsistent. One who wrote "this essay could easily be revised to become an A paper" noted, "I love the beginning but consider changing some words and use of terms" [to address the logical inconsistency]. In contrast to those who asked the student to insert facts, the professor who gave the C for content noted, on the other hand, that the paper "showed evidence of research" but the student still needed to illustrate with documentation. How could two people see such different texts? Perhaps they were both saying the same thing but in different ways. Sometimes faculty in the disciplines who teach writing are actually more comfortable responding to surface problems than to one within the structure. To some, formal correctness seems more important than meaning. In the case of the C/D paper, the professor blamed weak "writing" and documentation skills for the overall quality of the paper, though it was really the content that he wanted to address. Like the journalism professor who felt students should receive some grade just for putting words down on paper, this professor wanted to reward the student for putting down some facts--any facts--on paper, even if the paper did not help us to see if the facts were correct.

Most of the comments offered advice on editing, as if all the student needed to do was to correct mistakes and delete repetitive information. Many professors wrote "fragment" in the margin. Oddly enough, however, no one grader noted all of the errors. In fact, there was no pattern to the errors circled or pointed out. In a paper riddled with errors, there was the occasional circling of one misused word such as "metropolises," but not another and not always "metropolises." A few people wrote rules in the

margins to explain why certain errors had been circled instead of simply labeling errors. One professor, in response to the statement "High rent prices made it impossible to survive," wrote "Are they dead?" to get the student to reconsider diction. Looking at the various comments of this type, I reaffirmed my initial guess that comments on a weak piece of writing might address its superficial errors more than its content. Yet since there was no systematic approach to the marking of errors, I got the idea that people concentrating on surface features may have picked the occasional error to mark or reflect on to assert some authority about the grading process, to show the student that they "had been there" and read the paper.

Ultimately I found little difference between people who assumed that the paper would be revised and those who assigned a final letter grade. Except for instances of comments in response to meaning already noted, comments were largely editorial and geared toward surface changes in form for correctness. When changes were indicated at the meaning or content level, these were to lead the student largely to preserve meaning and simply add, delete, or consolidate. The overall comments made led me to infer that perhaps professors wanted the grade itself, and not the comments, to tell the student just how weak the paper was. When they read comments, however, students often perceive them as justification of letter grades. In a more subtle way, the students use the implicit messages to develop definitions of text. The comments on this paper seemed appropriate for cuing students to develop two contrasting definitions of text or writing:

1) Writing is product, and the text exists on paper. Once you have something on paper, revision means manipulating what you have there on paper. You insert, delete, reorganize, correct.

2) Writing is process, and the text may exist in part on paper but still be active at the idea level. If you haven't put on paper what you want to say, you have no final product. You need to go back and revise from the inside out.

The first definition was by far the most prevalent.

After thinking about the different definitions of text, I was struck by how the act of responding to student writing seemed to relate to a literary/critical stance. When we criticize a work of literature, our intention is not to lead the author to revise but simply to explain how a text is working on some level or even to say how well we like it. In formalist criticism, for example, to put it very simply or even simplistically, the critic's job is to explore the structure of a text, not the mind of the writer, and thus to focus on how the parts of a text (the words, sentences, etc.) contribute to the whole. The sources of the text and the writer's background are secondary to the "literary object" itself. Formalist critics have high standards to apply to literary texts. Contrary to the members of my study, however, critics have opportunities to apply their standards to works of literature which may have already passed some criteria for being admitted to the ranks of literature. At least they're published, and critics do not necessarily think of criticism as suggestions for revision.

Like these formalist critics, most professors in my study used their energies to try to explain to the student how the paper's parts fit or did

not fit the whole. They said to themselves, "We have something here on paper. Let's see what it means." And, "If it does not mean anything, let's ask the student to rearrange the parts." In a perversion of new critical standards, they accepted the whole, as weak as it was conceptually, and assumed that the meaning that could be discussed was that already apparent in the paper. Aside from the few who talked about how the paper needed to be developed, others seemed to imply to the student that if incorrect sentences were reworked, awkward phrasing edited out or changed, or repetitive information deleted, the paper would be much better. Why strengthen diction when the facts are not there? Why combine sentences that do not say anything much to begin with?

Professors who interacted with students through their comments and hoped to lead the student to revise, to turn the ideas inside out, seemed to have their roots more in reader response criticism. This school, again to put it simplistically, teaches the respondent to start with the text itself and to see the text evolve as an interaction between reader and text. In this case, we have reading as process. It is also important that the reader be able to point to actual sections of the text to support claims about the process, and it is also important that the text itself be able to support the process. Writers have a responsibility to their readers and to their discourse communities to share meanings, as the professor who commented on the exaggeration suggested. Louise Rosenblatt has said reminded us that "text embodies verbal stimuli toward a special kind of intense and ordered experience out of which insights may arise" (31-32). If a text does not elicit insights, the writer may be at fault. Comments that best help the writer to revise to clarify meaning and thus to offer the best stimuli should

be offered to even the weakest writers. All of us can learn from reader response critics.

The lesson in all of this? We need to be more aware of the signals we are sending to our students, especially our weaker students, in our comments. A grade alone is not enough to indicate to students what is weak or needs to be reworked. Although a grade may symbolize weak content, comments will lead students to perceive the weaknesses in other areas if the contents pertain more to superficial textual features. In addition, as we work with faculty in different disciplines to introduce them to the teaching of writing, we need especially to reinforce the fact that writing should be, if nothing else, meaningful. What I found in my little survey suggested that I would need to address the role of our comments more aggressively in a future seminar. Evaluators have a lesson to learn from critical theory, too. As we <u>adopt</u> the methods, however, we should <u>adapt</u> the definitions of text to allow for the fact that student writers are developing writers. We want them to be better writers. We need to learn to read their texts critically, and we need to reinforce realistic definitions of text in our comments.

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